

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

# GASTRONOMY AND HOSPITALITY: KEYS TO TOURIST SATISFACTION IN RURAL AREAS

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

There is a significant and growing group of tourists who, during their travels, seek out and participate in local gastronomy. For these tourists, local products are an integral part of the cultural heritage of the destination, serving as a means to understand its characteristics and customs. One expression of this trend was the “slow-food” movement, which originated in Italy in the late 1990s. This movement sought to create a connection between diet and the environment by promoting the consumption of local products. Following this trend, other initiatives emerged, such as the “100-mile diet” and “zero-kilometer restaurants” both promoting the consumption of locally sourced products.

Local cuisine and food have become an area of significant interest, sitting at the center of tourist experiences worldwide. Within the EU27, spending by tourists on domestic tourism accounts for nearly half of the total expenditure. In domestic tourism, spending on restaurants and cafés represented about a quarter of the total spending by European tourists in 2022. Thus, it is evident that gastronomy and food and beverage expenditures are also a crucial component of tourism’s economic impacts.

Currently, in line with increased environmental awareness and the shift towards a circular economy, there is a growing trend to consume locally sourced products and sustainable services. Some consumers are even willing to pay more for such products and services. Businesses in rural areas can offer proximity products and services that not only enhance local communities but also cater to a segment of the demand motivated by local gastronomy. Therefore, rural areas can serve as an ideal laboratory for the so-called “green transition” in tourism.

Local gastronomy can become a vital element for destinations for several reasons. First, the demand for local products generates local employment and significant economic spillovers within the region. Second, the demand for local products contributes to the branding of destinations. Thus, local gastronomy can stimulate the local economy while being an essential part of the tourist experience. A positive tourist experience is, in turn, one of the main keys to a destination’s success, including in rural tourism.

Hospitality, understood as human behavior aimed at protecting and showing respect for guests, is a crucial element in tourism. On one hand, hospitality improves interactions and

relationships between tourists and residents, influencing the image of destinations and the desire to visit them. On the other hand, it affects tourists' satisfaction and behavior, both during and after their trips, through word-of-mouth recommendations.

The theory of emotional solidarity posits that people who share common beliefs and behaviors tend to have closer relationships and can benefit mutually. If rural residents see tourism as a strategy for sustainable development and improving their well-being, they will support this strategy and be hospitable to tourists. In turn, tourists who perceive this hospitality will be more satisfied and loyal to the destination. Moreover, recent research shows a strong positive relationship between cultural adaptability and the degree of immersion in the destination. Tourists who value and respect the cultural identity of the destination tend to have a deeper and more enriching travel experience.

## **2. OBJECTIVES**

This research aims to test several hypotheses. First, it seeks to demonstrate that the perception of hospitality is not solely dependent on the behavior and attitudes of residents but also on the predisposition and involvement of visitors, particularly related to their motivations. More specifically, our first hypothesis is that motivation related to gastronomy and the consumption of local products positively influences the perception of hospitality. We believe that tourists motivated by the culture and resources of the destination generate greater hospitality from residents and, in turn, perceive this hospitality more intensely. On one hand, residents see these tourists as an opportunity to leverage their endogenous resources and, consequently, improve their quality of life and well-being. In this situation, the local population will be more receptive and friendly to tourists. On the other hand, we believe that tourists with these motivations have greater cultural adaptability, are more involved, more appreciative, and perceive local hospitality more intensely.

The study also aims to test whether perceived hospitality positively influences the overall image of the destination and visitor satisfaction. Additionally, another objective is to test whether the overall image of the destination positively influences satisfaction with its attributes. Finally, the study aims to examine whether satisfaction with the destination's attributes positively influences visitor loyalty.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

To achieve the stated objectives and test the proposed hypotheses, the relationships between tourists' motivations—specifically those related to local gastronomy—the perception of hospitality, destination image, attributes satisfaction, and loyalty are analyzed using a structural equation model. Specifically, the impact of gastronomy motivation on the perception of hospitality and how this perceived hospitality influences the image, satisfaction, and loyalty of visitors is studied.

The fieldwork was conducted in the Rede de Aldeias do Xisto, located in central Portugal, which has its origins in a series of public programs and initiatives from the early 21st century aimed at revitalizing cultural heritage. Traditional buildings were restored, infrastructure was built, and the area's endogenous resources were enhanced. Today, this

network consists of 27 villages that offer tourist accommodations in over 70 establishments. There are more than a dozen restaurants where visitors can enjoy local gastronomy, and nearly 20 shops where local products can be purchased. Additionally, there is a wide variety of activities that allow tourists to enjoy the region's natural and cultural heritage.

To understand visitors' perceptions regarding the analyzed aspects, a questionnaire was designed, and interviews were conducted in the different villages of the network (n=378). The questionnaire consisted of three main sections. The first section included a set of questions aimed at understanding visitors' previous experiences and how they learned about the destination. The second section included questions designed to assess motivations, perceived hospitality, image, satisfaction, and loyalty. The final section consisted of a variety of questions aimed at understanding the profile of the tourists and the characteristics of their trip.

#### **4. RESULTS**

The research results support the proposed hypotheses and reveal, first, a strong and significant relationship between tourists' motivations related to the consumption of local products and perceived hospitality. Tourists motivated by local gastronomy (who expressed a preference for local products and even a willingness to pay more for such products) strongly perceive the hospitality of both local residents and tourism operators. This motivation also indirectly and significantly influences satisfaction with the destination's attributes and has indirect effects on destination image and loyalty.

Secondly, the study also highlights the strong positive relationship between perceived hospitality and satisfaction with the destination's attributes among visitors motivated by local gastronomy. The relationship between perceived hospitality and satisfaction is not only direct but also indirect through the destination overall image. Perceived hospitality directly influences the overall image of the destination and indirectly influences loyalty. Following the theory of emotional solidarity, these relationships highlight the importance of the destination's hospitality in shaping tourist behavior.

#### **5. CONCLUSIONS**

This research is novel for several reasons. First, no prior studies have analyzed the impact of gastronomy motivation on the perception of hospitality by tourists. Second, the study considers hospitality from a global perspective, taking into account both commercial and spontaneous, unplanned interactions (a research area that has been largely unexplored until now). Finally, the study focuses on a rural area, where gastronomy and the consumption of local products can contribute to sustainable development.

The research results can help guide tourism policies in rural areas aligned with the green transition and circular economy. To achieve this, these areas should focus on proximity products and involve local producers. This would achieve a dual objective: directly meeting the demands of tourists motivated by gastronomy and ensuring that the local population, perceiving the benefits derived from tourism, will be more hospitable.

This increased hospitality will, in turn, enhance tourist satisfaction, increase loyalty, and improve the overall image of the destination.

The work presents significant contributions from both theoretical and practical perspectives. On one hand, it is pioneering in analyzing the relationship between gastronomic motivation and hospitality. On the other hand, hospitality is approached from a global perspective, considering not only commercial interactions but also spontaneous ones between visitors and the local population. As expected, the study also presents some limitations that could be addressed in future research. Firstly, it is a cross-sectional study focused on a specific territory, so it would need to be extended over time and include other geographical areas. Furthermore, future research could conduct a comparative analysis by including other motivations besides the gastronomic one. In both cases, these extensions would help verify the robustness of the relationships found.